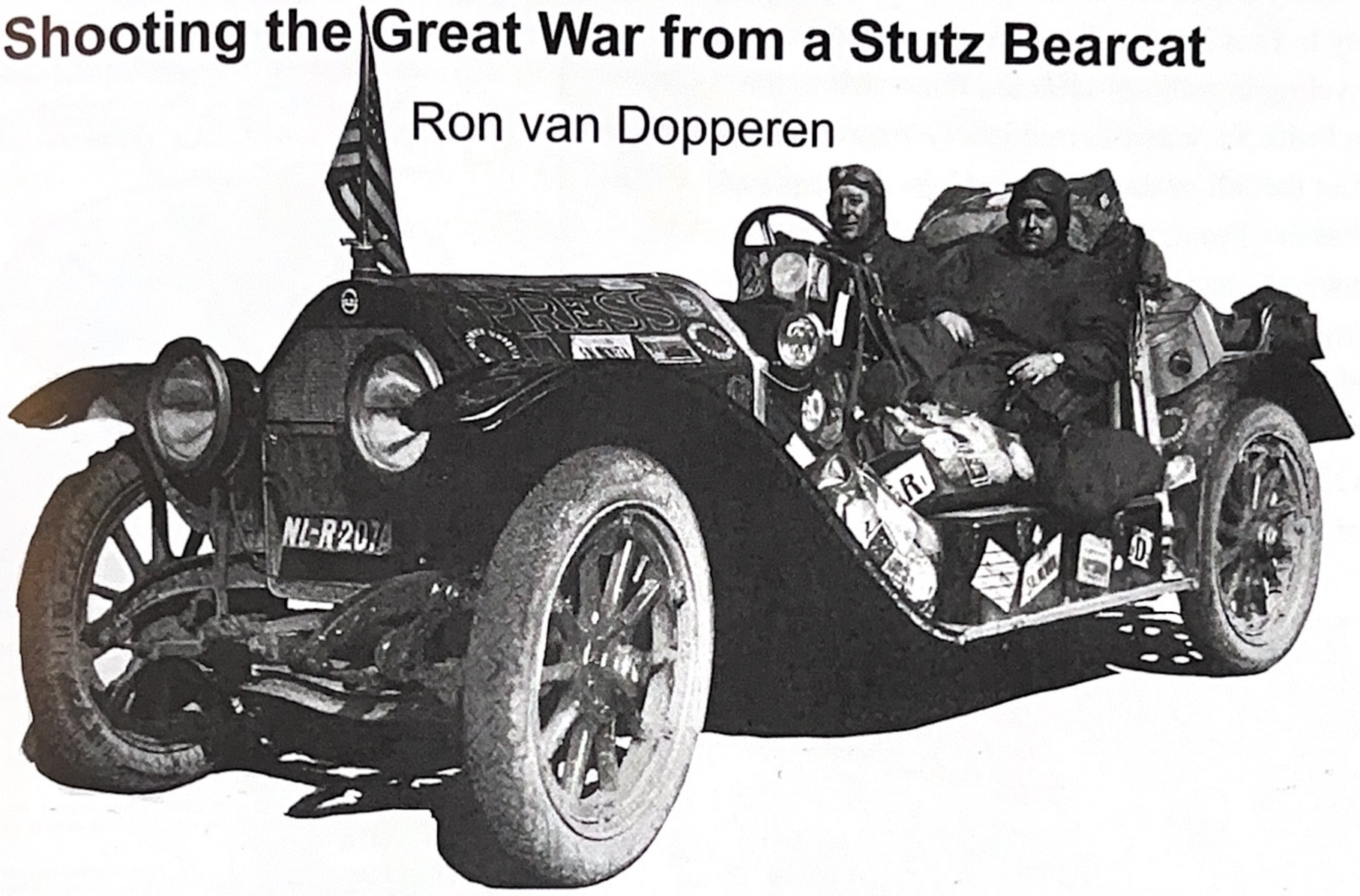
Shooting the Great War from a Stutz Bearcat

Ron van Dopperen



In March 1915, two American adventurers, Wilbur Durborough and cinematographer Irving Ries, set sail for Holland. Their mission? To capture the German army on film and in photographs. To undertake this thrilling task, Durborough had secured a sleek and powerful Stutz Bearcat.

The result of their endeavor, *On the Firing Line with the Germans*, features two central stars: Durborough himself and his prized, high-speed car. Durborough, a flamboyant, cigar-smoking press photographer, was commissioned by the Newspaper Enterprise Association to cover the German side of the conflict. Not content with capturing still images, he struck a deal with the War Film Syndicate in Chicago to produce a documentary.

The Stutz Bearcat was built for speed and spectacle — a perfect match for Durborough's larger-than-life personality. Designed for racing, the Stutz was as much a cinematic prop as a mode of transportation. To ensure it wouldn't raise suspicions, the car was discreetly omitted from the shipping manifest, allowing it to pass British inspections. Upon arrival in Rotterdam, the Stutz was tucked away in storage due to restrictions placed by the German authorities on private cars. When crossing the border into Germany, the car was equipped with a temporary Dutch license plate, a small but necessary concession to bureaucracy.

Durborough crossing the German border in his Stutz Bearcat, April 1915. (Courtesy LOC)

King of the Road

Once in Germany, Durborough must have relished the moment when he pushed the Stutz to its 80 mph top speed. Behind the wheel, he was accompanied by an officer from the German General Staff. The Germans were not willing to take any risks. Every photograph and film reel was closely censored, and although Durborough frequently used the Stutz, the

car was likely kept away from the front lines. During a journey to East Prussia, Durborough joined a group tour, traveling in military vehicles. On a visit to the Western Front, he was escorted in a German Mercedes. Even after the fall of the fortress of Novo Georgievsk on the Eastern Front, they had to make the journey on a crowded bus — another reminder of the strict transportation logistics and correspondent controls imposed by the military.

Somehow, Durborough managed to ship the Stutz back to New York. After the war, Durborough kept the Stutz for many years. But with the onset of the Great Depression, his beloved car was eventually sold at a

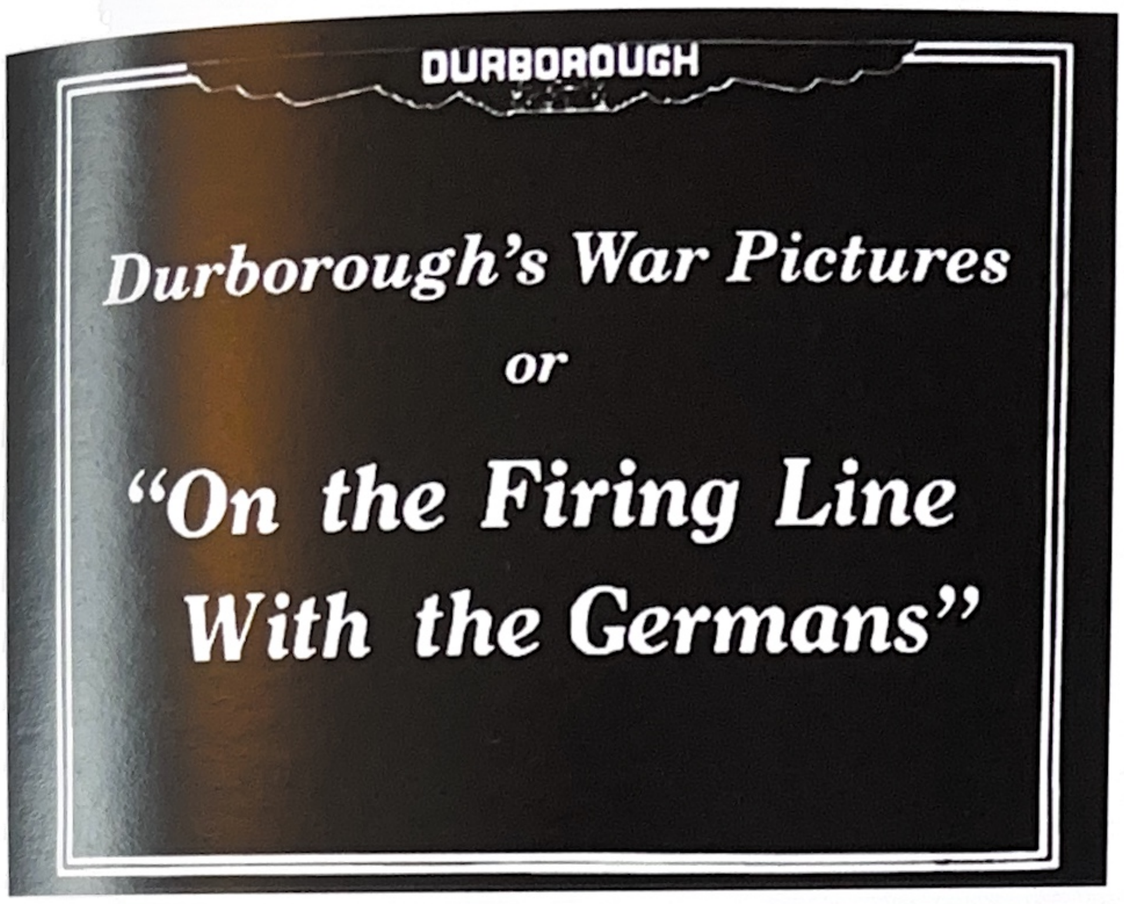
Durborough (left) and American correspondents working on the Stutz. Film frame from *On the Firing Line with the Germans* (1915). The car was shipped from New York to Rotterdam aboard the *SS Nieuw Amsterdam*. Wilbur Durborough and Irving Ries drove it to Berlin and followed the German army into Warsaw. They chained the car to a tree in Russian Poland for seven weeks while they traveled to the front in military vehicles.

Cleveland auction. One can only hope that this iconic vehicle has found its way into the hands of a passionate collector.

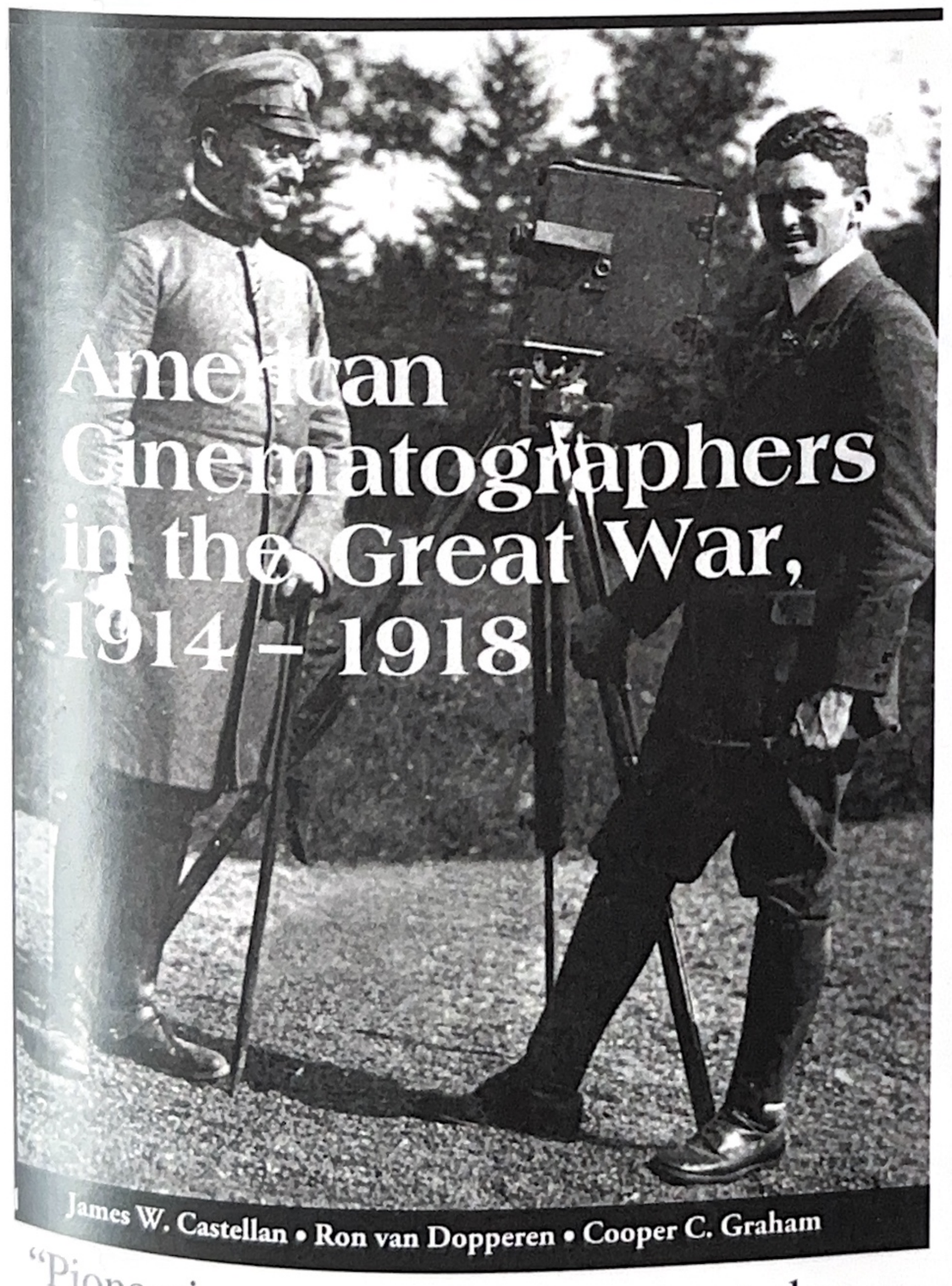
Wilbur Durburough and Captain Erwin Herber, the German officer assigned to shepherd Durborough and Irving Ries at the front and to prevent the Bearcat from being requisitioned. (*The Evansville Press*, 23 June 1915)

February 26, 1916
THE MOVING PICTURE WORLD
1359
We sent Durborough to Europe with a car and cameraman —7 months with the German Armies
"On the Firing Line With the Germans"
(Name and film both copyrighted)
WE MADE AND OWN THE NEGATIVE—8500 FEET of beautiful photography of the
War As It Is Actually Being Fought!
Notice to STATE RIGHT BUYERS!
Because we own this negative and because it is copyrighted, we can offer you every protection, and because these are wonderful pictures we can show you how to clean up big money.
The CHICAGO TRIBUNE Says
"There are War pictures and War pictures, but the Blue Ribbon goes to those taken by DURBOROUGH."
War Film Syndicate, 308 Mallers Bldg., Chicago, Ill.
In answering advertisements, please mention The Moving Picture World

Advertisement by the War Film Syndicate, promoting Durborough's film and his Stutz Bearcat. *Moving Picture World*, 26 February 1916.



Watch *On the Firing Line with the Germans* (USA, 1915). The film is unique in being the only American feature-length documentary made during World War I to survive intact. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=958QR_Cdg5U



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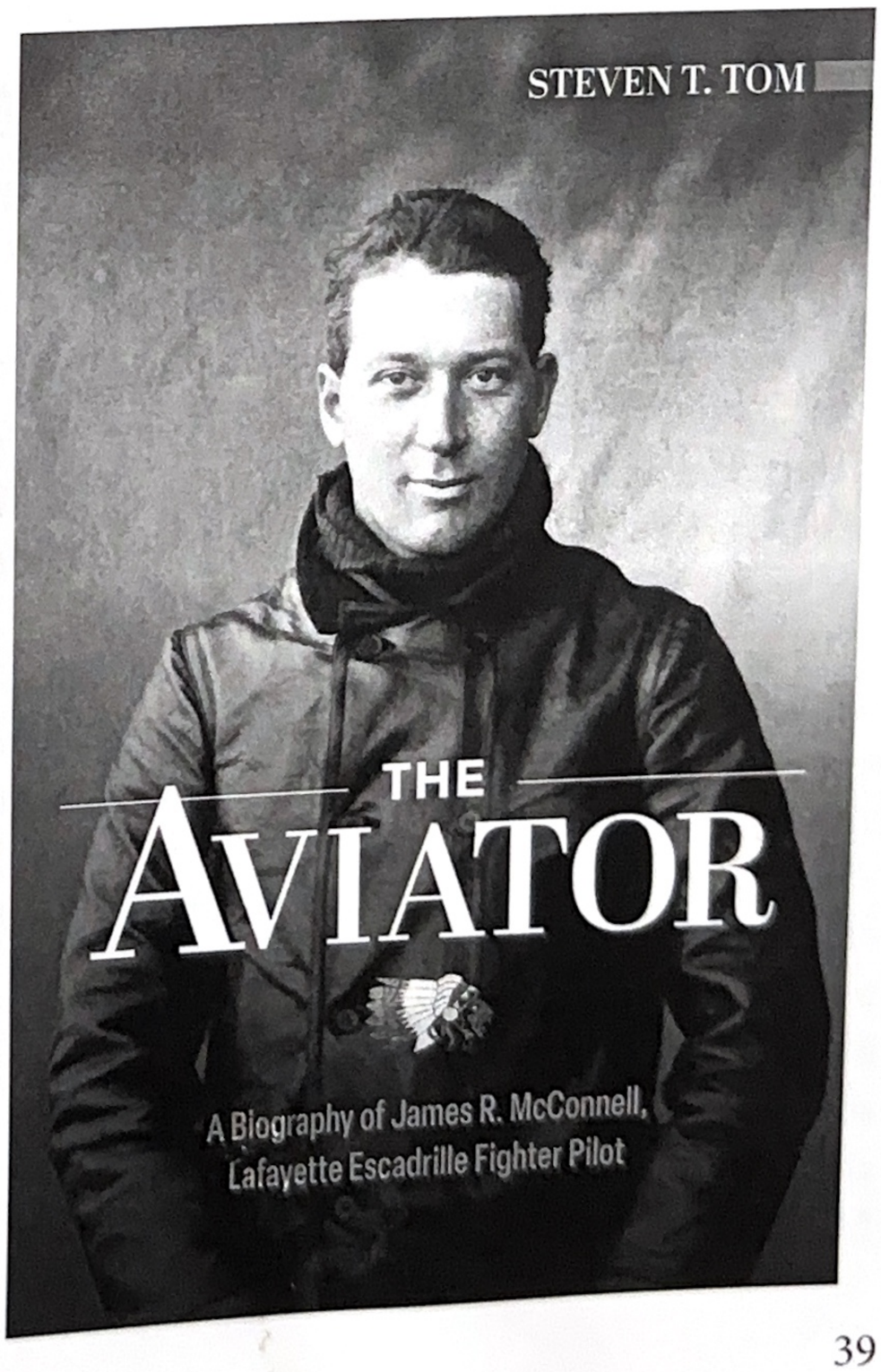
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